

Omaha
7 February 71

Dear Hal....

If I were a physician, & you were a patient of mine...well, my nervous system would probably have more anxiety attacks to deal with than yours ever would have time for. Yeah.

But I'm not a doctor (of anything), and for once I rather regret it—because I would like very much to try and advise you in best way possible.

As it is, all I can offer is bits & pieces, some "maybe" kind of notes or remarks.

OK. But I do want to repeat my earlier proposal about your making a trip here to see our doctor, a man of unusual ability. I would prefer this arrangement to any other. So you tell me again you can't make it. So I tell you again that if you change your mind, just call me & say so & we'll arrange things here.

Blackouts, dizzy spells, or any similar experiences should not, in my opinion, ever be treated lightly or indifferently. At the same time, a precise explanation of why one may suffer them is often a very long time in coming. What I am trying to say is that a good deal of professional skill is sometimes spent without achieving adequate answers, but unless the best skilled men at hand are sought out and consulted...then perhaps not even a chance of success may remain. Now. Read again the paragraph I'd written immediately above this one.

One thing we've both experienced, you and I, is severe fatigue. Not just having a too long day, a rough week or month or three months—but what may gradually become almost a way of living, year after year. (I can't help remembering how surprised you were when I told you my age. Your response that I looked rather older than that, was obviously quite true. And nothing very mysterious, tragic, romantic, etc. about what you saw. In large part, it was the result of, the more-or-less logical result of, chronic fatigue.) I think I know something about what sort of performance you have in recent years expected of yourself, and I'm sure you know, and have long known, that severe or chronic fatigue was an affliction of sorts but that in any case one had practically no chance at all of doing the work you had set out to do without contracting this at times debilitating 'side-effect.' Quite so. No sure way to beat it.

But I've noticed, too, in your letters sometimes you mention that you don't understand it when a little rest or slowing down of your usual pace doesn't clear everything up. (Sometimes, of course, it does appear to do just that—then one is the more puzzled if at other times it doesn't!)

A friend of mine who for several years worked with me at the hospital, and on the same night shift, described his feelings and

experiences regarding this exact problem, in a long conversation with me last year. The "wearing out" (or, at least, "wearing down") of mind and body had been quite gradual. Indeed, it was only after he had left the job completely that he began to pay attention to such a curious phenomenon as began, then, to be defined. Even after weeks and months of change from the old routines he still tired easily, physical coordination was at times slightly uncertain, eating habits improved but didn't help him to feel any better, etc., etc. In other words, long after he had left the job he still seemed to suffer from those things, those forms of malaise, that had finally made him decide to quit the job in the first place!

It took him six months or more to begin to feel the weight of the old habits lifting. The process is still continuing. The fellow I've been describing is about 27 years old, no more than that, and he has never pushed himself the way you have.

I don't know how directly a story like the one I've just mentioned can be made into the story of any one other person. I will say that I believe what my friend told me, and that I myself would very likely have similar experiences if I were to do as he did. And, indeed, my own doctor has on several occasions recommended at minimum a change of work hours. The only time I took this advice was when my ribs were broken and I was unable to work anyway. And I know I'm being careless. The string will have to run out eventually.

The trick, as I see it, is to finish the work with enough time to spare. Or to throw up the work altogether, the moment it becomes less than absolutely essential to work at it.

Or maybe we should simply think about whatever we mean to ourselves a bit more often.

Hal, I don't know if a year off from everything connected with all of your investigations would help. I don't believe you would take the year, my friend, in any case. But I do think you should work a bit at convincing yourself that chronic fatigue does have marked long range effects, that it can deceive one (especially someone with so little time to dwell on such things), and that carelessness does after all carry with it some formidable risks.

And when you say, as in this last letter: "...what I do not understand and cannot explain to myself does trouble me" I know you are being as open and honest as you can be about this whole matter, and I instantly take you at your word. I believe you. At the same time, there is the faint image of an auto mechanic, maybe, commenting on an engine. A new part, you seem to be saying, if I can just discover what new part is needed to clear this irritation up, then I can get on with the real work that I must do. Maybe. But the string will run out one day.

You see, it's just as I said: bits & pieces. I still wish you would come visit us...so we could cart you off to our medic. Think about it. And remember: you can't trouble a friend. You needn't ever apologize for writing me about anything. My only regret is that my responses are never as good or as useful as I'd like them to be.

Warmest regards,